"Isaacs"

SOME subjects need to be caricatured —done in greater than life size—in order to give an impression of reality. Montague Glass early discovered this, which may be the reason why his heroes of the cloak and suit business are as absurdly real as they are really comic. Joseph Gee, an Englishman, may not know this, and this may explain why his *Isaacs* is not as real as he should be, nor yet as funny as he is doubtless intended to be. In describing the various business adventures of his smart young Cockney Jew of the East End of London, Mr. Gee seems to have been handicapped by just this fear of caricature. Perhaps after all it takes a Potash to slapstick a Perlmutter with the fullest joy and the most uproarious results.

Mr. Gee's Isaacs is a young Russian Jew born in London—or-er, that is, he was born in Russia, since this is a war time book; oh, well, anyway, he wasn't strong enough to be a soldier; and, as with Shaw's little barber who has a tidy business down Shoreditch way, it would have been a crime, as Isaac says of himself, to put a man with his trading and business abilities into khaki.

And speaking of trading, did you ever stop to think, Isaacs asks us, that a Jew generally seeks to trade in things that have no absolute value, such as furs or jewels? Isaacs's adventures include, besides furs and jewels, raffles and insurance and fires—and the usual thing. Although he is hoaxed by a bogus German spy, the only time he is absolutely bested is when he meets his friend from the North. By the time the Scotchman is through with the Jew he has departed, leaving a note behind saying: "We'll be pluckin' more geese at Carrieknamuir in the autumn. Come up." And Isaacs makes the mournful comment: "One thing I'm sure of. If there's any Yid livin' up there it's only because they've skinned 'im so clean 'e ain't got enough cash left to pay 'is fare out of the country."

On the whole, however, Isaacs can take care of himself, and only occasionally has to call upon his solicitor, who tells the story. When the German spy pounces on Isaacs in the restaurant with the exclamation, "What luck?" Isaacs cyrils "Who for? You or me?" It is on another occasion that Isaacs says: "My lendin' day's Saturday, and on that day my place o' business is closed—or ought to be. Good day."

Those unfortunate people whose consciences would never permit them to be thrilled by the daring and sometimes humane exploits of the "gentleman burglar" will probably find a good deal to shake their heads over in *Isaacs*. But in this case the author will have only himself to blame for not slapsticking a little harder instead of manifestly trying to be fair to Isaacs, with the result that he makes him sometimes virtuous but also dull.

ISAACS. By Joseph Gee. Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott Company.

A Poet's View of Leonard Merrick

By CLEMENT WOOD.

A WRITER, like an unhurrying bud in the bleak early May of the world's first judgment, must wait for his time. To the accompaniment of instrumental solos from the English using masters of the novelist's craft, Leonard Merrick's corolla, to keep the figure, is unfolding petal after petal. Three volumes in the limited edition with introductions by Barrie, Howells and Maurice Hewlett, have already appeared. What have they to say to the lover of good books who comes across them for the first time? Are they worth the tunes of the piccolo, the 'cello, the trumpet, or no? Is this "novelists' novelist" a mirror of books or a window to life?

The first of the three, *Conrad in Quest of His Youth*, converts the conscientious agnostic. It is one of the joyous effervescences of the language. The high spirit of *Zuleika Dobson* is here, mated to the kindly variety of *The Crime of Sylvestre Bonnard*. All men are conscripted by life into one persisting vagrant journey: the search for one's youth; as all men have the same obvious goal, that death which opens a new and scattering youth. Many do not find the young goal, but Conrad Warrener did and all may. Childhood surroundings revisited, old friendships reenacted, old loves rewooed—these could not yield the sensations the traveller toward yesterday sought. Instead, he found it in—— But there! My lips once touched a leaf of the tree of silence; tongue shall shrivel against palate and speech fail before they reveal this authentic spring for which de Leon vainly thirsted and journeyed. Let Conrad hand you the cup, as he stands beside you.

The Actor-Manager and *Cynthia* are starker stories. They show young idealism upon the uplands of drama and fiction, in the inevitable conflict with grosser souls, both as to artistic and emotional relations. In both the conflict soils; in neither does it destroy the ideal or the idealist. The plots of the two show strong parallelisms. This common plot is not entirely original with Mr. Merrick; since Adam, Eve and Lilith, in pre-scientific and extra Biblical hours, enacted it, it has played frequent return engagements among men and women. Oliphant, the actor; Kent, the novelist, each burns a large part of his life's candle before the wrong woman.

These two unique "vampires"—Blanche Ellerton, who sucks notoriety for herself as an actress out of everything, even out of her baby's death, and Eva Deane-Pitt, whose caresses bleed Kent of continuous hack fiction to appear under her name—are detestable, yet real, predatory women in harsh lined portraiture. Each man meets the right woman first: but unwed Alma King and Kent's wife Cynthia, a lovely unfolding personality shaped of sunshine and striving, have to wait until the coast of the sirens has been passed before they can call their heart's chosen their own.

The artistic problem receives less emphasis than the personal one, but both find hopeful solutions. The sharpness of insight, the blade flash of comment and repartee, the authentic transcription from two narrow professional worlds, give the books a persisting value and charm.

And the people one meets between his covers! Cæsar Walford, coddled musical foghorn; Miss Wix, eternal needle tongued "poor relation"; James Ellerton, Blanche's father, mote souled "literary" novelist fouling his wife's pot boiling novelettes which support him; grouchy, untidy, lovable Turquand; the practical middle class Walfords—it is from such as these that our own cues come. They have lived and will live; the soul cleansing millennium is not scheduled for this century.

Restraint and shapeliness are two of this story teller's chief attributes. His tales are ended in your mind, not on his pages; they close with the technic of the packed short story and brisk novelette. It is a fine sense of values that draws the curtain when the close up begins that leaves the supremer emotions, where words must limp and stutter, to the silent artisanship of the reader's soul. There is an internal shapeliness as well: the three main episodes in *Conrad*, for instance, are in perfect symmetry. And this formal beauty surprises in unexpected places. When Oliphant and Blanche start upon their honeymoon.

"It wasn't a hansom in which he drove with her to Victoria, it was a celestial car."

Half a page later,

"It wasn't a celestial car in which he drove with her from Victoria to their apartment, it was a hansom."

There is an ever present allusiveness that is never illusive. Added to these is the wrought beauty of phrase after phrase. One instance will illustrate. Oliphant, his last promising chance for a "shop" gone, stands in the Strand before the restaurant in which the prosperous manager, once friend, is eating.

"The odour of the restaurant lurked in his nostrils enticingly, and a passing omnibus threw a clot of mud in his face."

Two clauses sum up much of the lives of the Oliphants and the Kents and all the story of those who fail of the heights. Such touches make the books golden.

An odd feature of the stories is the way they dovetail into one another. The incident of the desire to return to Mowbray Lodge and the childhood sweetheart, Mary Page, which gets a few paragraphs in *The Actor-Manager*, is expanded into a third of *Conrad*, with no change of names. The realistic author is the hero of *Cynthia;* the obverse of the picture, the same man at 50, an unconscionable bore, a dispiriting cynic, is James Ellerton, the father of Blanche in *The Actor-Manager*. Perhaps if one had all of Merrick before him the two half souls of each character would be revealed: we might love Blanche or Eva, despise Alma King, respect Cæsar Walford. So it is that lives dovetail. So the angle of vision changes the judgment in life; the owl hates what the lark hails.

The hypercritical find Mr. Merrick no realist. Oliphant, who objects to his wife playing a demi-mondaine on the stage, could not be a real actor, they say; he lacks the professoinal attitude. Kent, who regards a thousand words of fiction a day as literary exploitation, they are sure is no real novelist. And so it goes. Alas, these critics demand of realism that the characters live up to brain-spun patterns of what the actor, the author, should be; and because Mr. Merrick has seen them with inevitable human failings, they call him romanticist. No, he knows his people and his world; and he lets us know them.

There is a lack—a lack of vista, of sweep, of university, of the grand topic and the huge event. Mr. Merrick's art is fragmentary: the important fragment, true, but never the whole with its obscure beginnings and life's sardonic postscript. We cannot know his characters as we know Henry Esmond or Ernest Pontifex, Tess Iterberville or Emma Bovary. His colors are drabber than the Sorollalike quality of Ibanez. He does not catch and speak the interplay of events and generations as Romaine Rolland, Samuel Butler, Gilbert Cannan, Anatole France do.

Before and behind the stage curtain, before and after the book is published, these things he knows and tells; he is master of a microcosm, a transcriber of chamber music, who leaves the vaster harmonies to others. In his own world he knows no peer: his words own a deft and unerring finality. The enterprise of his novelist admirers and publishers in making these stories available enriches a literature sadly in need of wholesome food.

He is a contemporary to know and love.

"Heritage"

NOT very long ago, we are given to understand, Hugh Walpole wrote to a friend asking him to "look very specially at a novel *Heritage*. I think you will agree with me that it is a very remarkable one."

Heritage is a first novel by V. Sackville West, who is, we gather, an English woman of a very well known family. It deals with the great-granddaughter of a Spanish dancer who was mated to an English soldier of fortune. Ruth Pennistan is a simple Kentish country girl. She is madly loved by her cousin, who shares with her the strain of Spanish blood. The novel deals almost entirely with the extent of her heritage of Southern heat and instability. An Englishman of unusual introspectiveness tells the first part of the story, another Englishman of equal inwardlookingness is actor and narrator of the second part of the tale, and the story is finished by means of an incredibly long letter written by Englishman No. 1 to Englishman No. 2.

The novel itself is a striking but partly unsuccessful piece of writing. The author, like Henry James, is overcome with the sense of how melodramatic our lives are, at bottom. Like Mr. James she hovers continually on the brink of this melodrama, but never uncovers it.

HERITAGE. By V. Sackville West. George H. Doran Company.